

Robert Jenson and Contemporary Metaphysics

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Abstract: The purpose of this article is to demonstrate that, if we pursue an approach to metaphysics widespread in contemporary philosophy that moves from the study of language to ontology, but do not remove religious claims from the language deemed appropriate for the task, we end up with an approach to metaphysics which is remarkably similar to the kind of theological method which Robert Jenson has advocated for much of his career.

Introduction

Robert Jenson has often claimed that theology is, and ought to be, a form of metaphysics (Jenson 2014a); this despite the fact that he attributes certain central systematic (Jenson 1969) and ecumenical (Jenson 1992) difficulties to the metaphysics adopted by large parts of the Christian tradition. Christian theology, he thinks, has suffered from an inadequate digestion of the thought of classical antiquity: we have a peculiarly Greek dyspepsia. Jenson's first response to this problem aped that of many other theologians. He simply declared that theology ought to avoid metaphysics altogether (Jenson 2014a). However, he soon realized that metaphysics is not coextensive with that style of thinking which found its culmination in post-Kantian continental idealism (Jenson 2007), and, with a broadened conception of metaphysics, came to the position he has argued from circa 1969 to the present. That is, as above, that Christian theology is, and ought to be, a form of metaphysics.

That theology ought to lay claim to the term metaphysics,' means that, when theologians are working well, what they produce must bear at least some similarity to what metaphysicians produce. Otherwise, the use of the term is otiose. Thus, while Jenson has problems with some of the forms that metaphysics has taken historically, in general he ought to consider what metaphysicians produce to be useful and licit for theologians.

The aim of this paper is modest. I hope to show that Jenson's theological project does fit within a broad conception of metaphysics, and that certain features of his method are similar to methods employed by contemporary metaphysicians. That is, I aim to provide support for his contention that his theology *is* metaphysics according to standards drawn from contemporary metaphysics. Although I also agree with Jenson that theology *ought* to be metaphysics, to argue this claim is outside the remit of this paper. Once it is argued that Jenson's theology is metaphysics, it is a further question as to whether, at the level of method, it is *good* metaphysics; that is, it is not *bad*. I will give some

suggestive comments on this question towards the end of the article, but I will not approach a full and convincing answer.

One final qualification: this article contextualizes Jenson's thought against so-called 'analytic,' that is, Anglo-American (with some Australian) metaphysics. This is appropriate because it was during Jenson's engagement with analytic philosophy in Oxford that his views on theology and metaphysics were forged (Jenson 2007). However, debates on method in analytic metaphysics will be obscure to many theologians. As a result, for the sake of both length and expediency, my use of contemporary work in analytic metaphysics will be rough and loose. I am looking for claims that are broadly true, and positions that fit, even if awkwardly. I will not be as kind to the detail of what I survey as many analytic metaphysicians would, quite rightly, like and expect. If the result of this is that Jenson's theology only looks like metaphysics if you squint, that is a result I will accept as befitting an early, preliminary exploration. If I cannot here be convincing, I will content myself with being suggestive.

I. Jenson's Theological Method

Jenson sets out his methodological presuppositions reasonably clearly at the beginning of volume 1 of his *Systematic Theology*. Among these are the nature and role of the Church, the sources of theology, the proper object of theology, and many other matters of importance. For our purposes, we will focus on his vision of theology as a second order, grammatical discourse, which reflects on the proclamation of the Church found in both evangelism and worship.

The claim most central to understanding Jenson's theological method is that we ought not think that prolegomena to theology "must enable the enterprise, that the axioms and warrants needed to set specifically theological cognition in motion must be antecedently established" (Jenson 1997, 3). This is, *in nuce*, Jenson's denial of natural theology. No philosophical system ought to be used to set a foundation for theological work.

Instead, theology will begin with Gospel, specifically, that God raised Jesus from the dead, and the implications of that historical event. Theology, Jenson claims, occurs at the transition from reception of this news to proclamation, with the goal of discerning what its meaning and implications are. As such, the form of a theological proposition, or as Jenson says, a "theologumenon," is always, "to be saying the gospel, let us say 'F' (rather than 'G')." Where 'F' is "a *sample* of right gospel," or "a metalinguistic *stipulation* about the gospel" (1997, 17). This does not mean that theology has finished with any particular set of such claims, or that it will finish at any point. Theology is an ongoing consultation, a debate that continues when confronted with questions both new and old.

If this is really the form theology ought to take, then theology is a second-order discourse: it is grammatical. Grammatical discourse is discussion of norms for speech. It can concern both rules about how words related to one another; that is, how to form well-formed formulae. It can also concern how words relate to extra-linguistic entities; that is, how words ought to be related to things, events, or situations. In all of this section of the *Systematic Theology*, George Lindbeck, with whom Jenson has worked in ecumenical efforts, is an unmentioned but readily apparent influence. Jenson says that, "The first-order discourse of faith is,

on the one hand, proclamation and, on the other hand, prayer and praise; we have described theology as hermeneutic reflection *about* this believing discourse" (1997, 18). This point is not new of course, all creedal and conciliar statements work like this (Crisp 2013).

Thus far, this brief summary follows Lindbeck's cultural-linguistic account of doctrine reasonably closely (Lindbeck 1984, 79-83). This setup may itself be a joke that Jenson is playing on the reader. He observes that such propositions do not in fact appear to be merely grammatical rules. When the Creed has it that "Christ is very God and very Man in one hypostasis", Jenson says that it "seems to say something not just about language but also about an extralinguistic entity, the person Jesus Christ" (1997, 18). What's more, this is how the framers would have taken it. Indeed, "the drafters and promulgators of this doctrine would certainly have denied that it could accomplish its grammatical task except just as it has this descriptive force" (Jenson 1997, 18.). To put this more forcefully, Jenson says that theological propositions have the "appearance of regulating language by stating extralinguistic fact" (1997, 19). That such possibilities should exist for grammar would have been outlandish in the philosophical context that Jenson imbibed as a student and young academic, even though now it does not seem so strange.

For Jenson, there is a nice parallel from the world of grammar, properly speaking: "if Christian theology is grammar, then it is *prescriptive* grammar. Theology does not necessarily map the actual practice of the Christianese-speaking community at any time" (1997, 21). Thus does Jenson turn Lindbeck's model on its head, neatly fitting it into what Lindbeck would call the propositional model of doctrine (Lindbeck 1984, 63-69). If not from reflection on actual practice, how can Jenson justify prescriptivism of this kind? Such prescriptivism can only be justified by revelation in the context of the Church. Alluding to an essay on hegemonic discourse he published in the 90s, Jenson says that "we are able to do this because we do indeed overhear how our King speaks; we are in one community with the discourse 'of God and his saints'" (Jenson 1997, 20; cf. Jenson 1994).

For Jenson, such linguistic prescriptivism can mean only one thing: theology proper is, has always been, and must be metaphysics. What does he mean by metaphysics? "It claims to know elements of reality that are not directly available to the empirical sciences or their predecessor modes of cognition, but that yet must be known – if only subliminally – if such lower-level cognitive enterprises are to flourish" (Jenson 1997, 20). This is a robust description of a realist metaphysics. Further, for Jenson, "theology...claims to know the one God of all and so to know the one decisive fact about all things, so that theology must be either a universal or founding discipline or a delusion" (1997, 20). This gives us, in brief, some understanding of Jenson's theology, and why theology and metaphysics are coextensive disciplines. Our task next will be to give a brief account of metaphysics as understood in the contemporary Anglo-American tradition, before looking at some more specific aspects of method.

II. What is Metaphysics?

Peter van Inwagen describes metaphysics as "the study of ultimate reality" (van Inwagen 2014, 1). We might then ask, how exactly does one go about

studying “ultimate reality”? Michael Loux explains that the aim of metaphysics as he sees it is to “characterize the nature of reality, to say how things are” (2006, 11). For Loux, category theory is especially appropriate for general metaphysics; indeed, contemporary metaphysics *is* category theory. What do we mean by category theory? There are two ways of understanding it, roughly termed, Kantian and Aristotelian. For the Kantian, the task is to “identify the most general concepts at work in our representation of the world, the relationships that obtain among these concepts, and the presuppositions of their objective employment” (Loux 2006, 7). For the Aristotelian, the task of metaphysics includes the categorical delineation of reality rather than mere concepts. For our investigation of Jensen, the Aristotelian approach will prove most useful.

How does the metaphysician identify the most general categories with which she works? The method is, in brief, to ask of something ‘what is it?’ Once that is answered, ask again, ‘what is that?’ and so on until one comes to the answer ‘a being’ or ‘something which exists.’ The most general category is the penultimate answer. This, Loux admits, does not seem like a useful or interesting discipline, and it is hard to understand how disagreements arise if this exercise of extended stamp collecting and cataloguing is the extent of metaphysics.

In order to ask ‘what is it?’ we must first have a set of objects. The question becomes ‘what is there?’ In contemporary metaphysics, this has become the foundational question of ontology (Quine 1948). As it happens, it is also a very difficult and controversial question, and it explains the interest of metaphysics as category theory: “philosophers who disagree about categories disagree about what objects there are” (Loux 2006, 15). That is, they disagree over ontology. To quote at length, in a metaphysical dispute:

there is a body of prephilosophical facts that function as data for the dispute. One party to the dispute insists that to explain the relevant prephilosophical facts, we must answer the existential question affirmatively. The other party claims that there is something philosophically problematic in the admission of entities of the relevant sort into our ontology, and argues that we can account for the prephilosophical facts without doing so. (Loux 2006, 16-17)

There are several important aspects to note in this description of metaphysical activity. First, there is a sense in which this is quite conservative. The constant appeal is to explanation of prephilosophical facts. These need not be facts from everyday experience however: they could be facts coming from the sciences, physics, biology, chemistry and so on. These facts might also include political or religious claims, as we will see. However, it is important to note that the kinds of claims that are to be admitted into metaphysical argumentation, and the way one decides which to admit, are, as we shall see, contentious. Second, this kind of philosophy is conversational. Third, what metaphysics does is account for prephilosophical facts in a consistent way.

In addition to working out the categories native to an ontology, metaphysicians dispute the relationships between categories. Two philosophers might agree on the ontological status of some object, but disagree on whether its type reduces to some more fundamental type. The question here is whether the category into which some existent object fits is primitive, or basic. This is an

important part of metaphysics, as Loux says, “to provide a complete metaphysical theory is to provide a complete catalogue of the categories under which things fall and to identify the sorts of relations that obtain among those categories” (Loux 2006, 18).

A. W. Moore offers a similar account of the task of metaphysics, although it is distinct enough to be worth mentioning. Part of the reason that Moore’s task is different is that, rather than introducing the subject area of metaphysics as is Loux, or offering a brief metaphysical system, as is van Inwagen, Moore is engaged in historical philosophy in his work, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. His definition needs to be broad enough to encompass those writers central to the development of the discipline, rather than simply delineating what goes on under the name of metaphysics today.

Moore says that “Metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things” (2012, 1). This is a working definition, formulated explicitly for his purpose in writing a history of metaphysics. It is also a vague definition. This allows him to discuss many diverse things that go under the name ‘metaphysics.’ Moreover, it is by no mean obvious that a vague definition for ‘metaphysics’ in a general sense is a bad thing. In any case, Moore’s definition requires explanation.

By ‘most general.’ Moore intends those concepts with which metaphysics is primarily concerned. That is, concepts under which a great many other concepts fall, and which make up features of our thinking about most any subject. He uses it to describe these concepts because he does not want to assume anything about such concepts being analytic, synthetic, *a priori*, or *a posteriori*, that quartet originating with Kant which has so often been used to define the business of metaphysics. He also wants to make use of the ‘superlative’ element of the expression ‘most general.’ For instance, for the positivist who sees no use for non-empirical theorizing, metaphysics might simply coincide with the most basic physics, whether cosmological or quantum.

Moore calls metaphysics an ‘attempt,’ in part because he does not want to assume that it is a science, productive of knowledge. He also uses the term because it ensures the possibility of metaphysics. An attempt is easier to make than a successful attempt.

Finally, metaphysics aims at making sense of things. Both the terms ‘sense’ and ‘things’ are intentionally vague. To make sense might mean to find “something worth living for, perhaps even finding the meaning of life, and on the other hand discovering how things work” (Moore 2012, 5). Moore does not want to decide between these aspects in his definition. That metaphysics is directed toward ‘things,’ helps it to hold onto some object, however vague. Metaphysics is not like pure mathematics. ‘Things’ also serves a useful purpose in relation to ‘make sense of,’ as “making sense of something is a matter of rendering intelligible, with all the associations of productivity that has” (Moore 2012, 6).

Given these various broad definitions of metaphysics, does Jenson’s theology count? Jenson’s theology in fact does not count as metaphysics under Moore’s broad definition. Why is this? For Moore, metaphysics is the most general attempt to make sense of things. For Jenson, theology is primarily a practical science directed towards maintaining the cogency of the activity of the church. A part of this activity is speculative engagement with the events of the Gospel understood as being somehow identical with God. Even here, however, the intention is not to make general sense of things. Rather, because God is the creator

of all, if we focus on God, things get made sense of inevitably as a result. To see this explicitly, it is worth quoting him at length:

You try to think your way through the gospel, letting the metaphysical chips fall where they may. In the process however, they make a heap. They amount to something. They add up to something like a Christian philosophy. It won't be because you started out to make a Christian philosophy either. It will be because you started out trying to understand the gospel. (Jenson 2014b, 9)

Interestingly then, for Moore's definition, it is Jenson's intention, rather than the kind of system he produces, which stops him from being a metaphysician. In contrast to Moore, undeniably, under Loux's definition, Jenson produces metaphysics of a kind. He delineates categories, and makes straightforward ontological claims about what exists, and how categories of existent things relate to one another (e.g. Jenson 1997, 207-223). Jenson can be considered as a metaphysician under Loux's definition because Loux does not build intention into his definition. Which method of definition is more appropriate is not our concern here. We need only point out that under some broad, plausible definition of metaphysics Jenson's work counts, while under another, it does not. To further enquire as to Jenson's relation to contemporary metaphysics, it will be worthwhile to consider his relationship to some recent trends in method.

III. From Truths to Ontology

We have seen that contemporary metaphysics takes prephilosophical facts as data. For one strand of the current debate, this data takes the form of descriptive sentences, or more precisely, propositions. The method consists of the way one approaches these sentences, and the sentences that are permitted for philosophizing.¹ There are a number of philosophers who can be grouped together in a broad sense, although the details of their views differ considerably. Here I try to demonstrate the similarity by focusing on two major figures, who in different ways move from a set of propositions to the description of an ontology.

a. Quine and quantification

In his famous essay, "On What There Is?", W.V.O Quine remarked that the question of ontology can be summed up in the question "what is there?" (1948, 21). This question can be answered even more simply: "everything." As we have seen above however, "there remains room for disagreement over cases" (Quine 1948, 21). The remainder of his essay is taken up with a discussion of how this disagreement can be formulated. For our purposes, the key section is short:

We commit ourselves to an ontology containing numbers when we say there are prime numbers between 1000 and 1010; we commit

¹ For a defence of 'operating on the semantical plane' in metaphysics, see Quine, 1948.

ourselves to an ontology containing centaurs when we say there are centaurs; and we commit ourselves to an ontology containing Pegasus when we say Pegasus is. (Quine 1948. 28)

The Quinean method for answering the ontological question is commonly understood to be this: one takes the simplest form of the set of the most fundamental propositions one would want to maintain. These sentences are then translated into a 'quantifier-variable' idiom.² Whatever one quantifies over using the existential quantifier is a constituent of the ontology of the one who maintains that set of propositions.

There are two caveats we need to be careful to bear in mind if we are to understand Quine correctly. First, his method is a tool for discussing the possible ontological commitments of a theory, not for establishing any particular ontology or ontological system beyond doubt. Because this method operates as reflection on a theory or a set of given propositions, any ontology that results will necessarily reflect the propositions given. Second, this method is not mechanical. Sentences can often be translated into the quantifier-variable idiom in a number of ways, and depending on the translation, the resulting ontology can vary. This would be a significant weakness if the method were aimed at finishing in a finally conclusive ontology. However, as a tool for discussion between parties who disagree, it serves as an aid in the clarification of precisely where disagreements lie, and it fulfills this function admirably (van Inwagen 1998).

b. Armstrong & truthmakers

David Armstrong wrote the standard text in metaphysics concerning 'truthmakers,' called *Truth and Truthmakers*. It came out of a discussion in Australian metaphysics concerning phenomenalism, the "claim that physical objects are constituted out of sense-data or sense-impressions" (Armstrong 2004, 1). The problem was that if this is the case, it becomes difficult to make sense of counter-factual claims regarding the existence of a world without any sensate beings, such as "the universe could have existed without any beings possessing mind." Armstrong asks, "Suppose that the required counterfactual propositions are indeed true. What are the truthmakers for these truths? Must there not be *some way the world is* in virtue of which these truths are true? *What is it?* How does the world make these truths true?" (2004, 1). Armstrong admits that this way of thinking will only be appealing to a realist: "to demand truthmakers for particular truths is to accept a *realist* theory for those truths" (2004, 5). This, however, is not to the detriment of the project. It allows us to take Armstrong to be a part of the Aristotelian project of metaphysics as described above.

Armstrong notes that the search for truthmakers for all the categories of truths we want to accept amounts, in effect, to a metaphysics: "The question what truthmakers are needed for particular truths...can be, and regularly is, as difficult as the question of metaphysics, the question of ontology" (2004, 4). The search for truthmakers can function as a method for metaphysics, although not, Armstrong warns, a "royal road."

² For a helpful introduction to quantifier variable idiom, see van Inwagen 1998, 237-241.

By this point, the general realist idea behind truthmakers should be apparent, but for the sake of clarity, we can describe a truthmaker in this way: for some truth, there is a truthmaker, “some existent, some portion of reality, in virtue of which that truth is true” (Armstrong 2004, 5). The relationship between a truthmaker and its truth is cross-categorical. For Armstrong, a ‘truth’ is simply a true proposition. The relation is cross-categorical because the truthmakers for true propositions will not necessarily themselves be propositions.

The path from language to ontology need not be strictly one-way. As with Quine’s method, there is room for nuance and care. The method begins with truths, true propositions: “it is what we take to be truths, that have to be our starting point” (Armstrong 2004, 26). But this does not have to be slavish. Even if we proceed by taking “certain things to be true, and then ask what truthmakers these truths demand” (Armstrong 2004, 26), there is room for judgment. It may be that identifying certain truthmakers will lead us to assert propositions, which we previously had not. It may also be that certain sentences necessitate classes of truthmakers which we find problematic, in which case our task turns to translation of these sentences to see if these truthmakers can be avoided. In either case, “to postulate certain truthmakers for certain truths is to admit those truthmakers to one’s ontology. The complete range of truthmakers admitted constitutes a metaphysics . . .” (Armstrong 2004, 23).

At this very general level, there are many ways in which Armstrong’s project seems very similar to Quine’s. Armstrong himself describes the key difference. “Why should we desert Quine’s procedure for some other method? The great advantage, as I see it, of the search for truthmakers is that it focuses us not merely on the metaphysical implications of the subject terms of propositions but also on their *predicates*” (2004, 23). If we recall, Quine’s procedure relied on, sometimes creative, translation of sentences into QVI. This translation only involves quantifying over the subjects of sentences, which was intentional on Quine’s part, as he referred to predicates as “ideology” (Armstrong 2004, 23). Armstrong is trying to bring predicates back into metaphysics, as he thinks that certain kinds of metaphysical enquiry are overlooked by Quine’s method.

If we look at these two figures, the similarity is clear. As above, they both, in various ways, move from propositions to the assertion of an ontology. At a broad level, this is what Jenson is describing when he calls theology a second level, grammatical discourse which issues in prescriptive grammar. As with Quine and Armstrong, Jenson has some flexibility built into his method. Reflecting on the truths proclaimed by the Christian faith issues in a grammar which is held to be authoritative for the Church, but similarly, this grammar provides new truths which can provide material for further reflection. There is also a difference. Quine and Armstrong take it that, aside from the set of propositions used, there are no criteria for the kind of ontology put forward, other than perhaps parsimony, plausibility, and consistency. For Jenson, as has been implicit in his description of a normative grammar beholden to the language of God and the saints, theology has a wider set of norms which it must satisfy.

IV. The Range of Admissible Propositions

If we accept some kind of method moving from language, or from propositions, to ontology, we are still left with a very important question: which sentences ought we to operate on in our metaphysical discussion? This question takes on new importance because it is an area where there is the potential to drive a wedge between Jensen and contemporary metaphysics. My contention will be that although this will certainly alienate Jensen from some metaphysicians, it is not clear that there is a standard for which propositions ought to be grist to the metaphysical mill which is explicitly affirmed by all metaphysicians, but not by Jensen. As such, it is possible that Jensen will not be so easily edged out of the ground occupied by contemporary metaphysics.

a. Armstrong

Famously, for Quine the sentences which we ought to operate on are the deliverances of the natural sciences. For Armstrong, there are three classes of truths from which a metaphysics might properly deduce the existence of truthmakers.

The first class is Moorean truths. Moorean truths are, in essence, the deliverances of common sense. Common sense has to be treated carefully here. Armstrong distinguishes it from those things that everyone tends to believe. On his understanding, that the world is flat is not part of common sense, or “bedrock common sense” (Armstrong 2004, 27) as he calls it. Rather, it concerns propositions like ‘human beings have heads,’ ‘there is air outside the window,’ and ‘the sun will rise tomorrow.’ These things, says Armstrong are ‘*general* Moorean truths, and a good rough test for the members of this class is that it is almost embarrassing to mention them outside the context of philosophy’ (2004, 27). It is possible for what we have taken to be Moorean truths to be false, but as Moorean truths are epistemically fundamental, they will always be shown false based on *other* Moorean truths. As such, we must accept Moorean truths in some form in our philosophizing.

The second class is the deliverances of the ‘rational sciences’, mathematics and logic. Armstrong distinguishes ‘rational sciences’ from ‘empirical sciences’ by asserting that the former are *a priori* while the latter are *a posteriori*.

The third set of acceptable premises is the deliverances of the empirical sciences. Within the empirical sciences, there is a vague distinction between settled issues: the composition of water, or the theory of evolution, for instance, and frontier science which is still very much under debate. Nevertheless, the empirical sciences do give us propositions which are known, and, says Armstrong, even when knowledge is lacking, there are “cases where a high degree of rational assurance can be assigned to that belief” (2004, 32).

For Armstrong, these three classes constitute the acceptable starting point for metaphysical enquiry. He labels them, “the rational consensus.” Interestingly however, they do not exhaust what it is rational for a person to *believe*. He says that he has been convinced by Peter van Inwagen that “we all hold beliefs...on matters that go beyond what we might call the rational consensus” (Armstrong 2004, 34). These might include religious, social, moral, or political beliefs which

people are not going to give up, even though everyone is perfectly aware that others might disagree with them. This happens in philosophy as well. Philosophical beliefs are explicitly not a part of the so-called rational consensus, and “yet that does not stop us from upholding our own opinions in the most vigorous and obstinate way” (Armstrong 2004, 35). This is not irrational. Indeed, “belief not only can and does, but in many cases *should*, run ahead of...the rational consensus” (Armstrong 2004, 35). Nevertheless, in philosophy, “we should retain a feeling for where there really is knowledge and where there is only more or less rational belief” (Armstrong 2004, 35), in other words, the truths with which we work in the search for truthmakers are those of the rational consensus. Why is this so, what is Armstrong’s justification for this restriction? It seems to be that philosophy ought to work with knowledge, rather than merely rational beliefs. To quote at length:

I do not think that it is rational for any of the contending persons, in religion or in philosophy, publicly to *claim* knowledge. For though they *may* know (I am prepared to concede), it is hard to see how they can know that they know. A quiet hope that they really do have knowledge will be best. (Armstrong 2004, 35)

For our purposes, it is useful to note that Armstrong wants to assert a principled distinction between the kinds of prephilosophical truths that one doing the work of metaphysics ought to observe, and those one ought not to observe.

b. van Inwagen

Armstrong names van Inwagen as the origin of his insight that it is licit for us to believe things for which we do not have firm evidence or proof. He cites the paper “It is Wrong Everywhere, Always, and for Anyone, to Believe Anything upon Insufficient Evidence” (van Inwagen, 1996) In it, van Inwagen explores the implications of this attitude, taken from W. K. Clifford’s lecture, “The Ethics of Belief” (1999), and finds that if taken seriously, this attitude would be seriously debilitating in all areas of life, not simply with regard to religious or political beliefs. He does not discuss whether such beliefs can be used in metaphysical argumentation. For that we may turn to his *Metaphysics*, already discussed above.

In his *Metaphysics*, van Inwagen describes physical cosmology and revealed theology as two subject areas which substantially overlap with philosophical metaphysics. Of these two, he states that for the purposes of his introductory work, he will employ the results of physical cosmology, but not of revealed religion. This then seems like it could be a restriction similar to Armstrong’s desire to include the rational consensus, but not religious or political beliefs in metaphysics. Helpfully, van Inwagen gives us his rationalization for excluding revealed theology from his work:

The reason is simple enough: by appealing to physical cosmology, I do not restrict my audience in any significant way, and if I were to appeal to what I believed to be divine revelation, I should no doubt restrict my audience to those who agreed with me about the content

of divine revelation – and I do not wish so to restrict my audience.
(2014, 9)

Rather than the kind of distinction we saw above concerning a rational consensus, van Inwagen does not appeal to some defining difference intrinsic to the kinds of propositions he will examine. Rather, it is a pragmatic decision based on the desired scope of his *audience*. Presumably, although van Inwagen does not say this here, he would find it acceptable to employ religious and revealed doctrines in metaphysics that was constructed for a specific community which accepted these as true.

If we remove principled limitations to the kinds of claims that can count as a beginning for metaphysics, we come to a situation much like the ‘dialogical pluralism’ described by Nicholas Wolterstorff (2011), which is created precisely by the lack of any generally convincing claims about which beliefs can count as rational, and which sentences count as meaningful. This also allows Jenson into the metaphysical game. As we saw above, one of the distinctive features of Jenson’s theological method is his refusal to allow priority to those claims normally described as ‘philosophical’ or neutrally ‘rational’ over those called ‘theological.’

The goal of my working through this material is to attempt to convince you that if we accept some metaphysical method which moves from language to ontology, but do not cut out religious claims from the admissible prephilosophical data, we end up with an activity which looks very much like the kind of theological method which Jenson promotes in his *Systematic Theology*.

How so? If we take truthmaker metaphysics broadly considered, we have a method aiming at a realist metaphysics, moving from propositions to ontology. If these propositions do not exclude religious claims, then how would such a metaphysics operate except as second-order grammatical discussion which seeks ‘truthmakers,’ features of reality in virtue of which religious and other claims are true? Interestingly, such a theology/metaphysics need not exclude Moorean truths, rational sciences, or natural science from its own presuppositions. Jenson does in fact appeal to Moorean truths in some of his arguments (1997), in the prolegomena to his *Systematic Theology* he explicitly grants that the study of logic is not something to be excluded as ‘Olympian Parmenidean’ religion (1997, 10), and in a fascinating essay called “You Wonder Where the Body Went” he denies that there can be any strict boundary even between theology and the natural sciences (1995).

V. Norms for Theology

Jenson does not ask precisely the same question as we find in Quine and Armstrong concerning the permissible range of propositions to be used in ontology, and yet there is an analogous concern. If theology is prescriptive grammar, what are the grounds upon which it prescribes? For Jenson, the answer to this involves complex historical investigation, as well as some way to delineate which propositions Christians ought to maintain.

Theologians require norms to make prescriptive judgments. In its most primitive manifestation, the work of theology occurred when, while the apostles

were still living, they were asked ‘is this the gospel?’, and could answer, yes or no. Such exchanges are found in the New Testament. As the apostles died out, the trio of scripture, creed and office developed to fulfil this role. Jenson says that “the church’s tradition sustains the community’s self-identity through time only in that it sustains witness to a particular event, the Resurrection” (1997, 25). Tradition, however, is not unproblematic. Many things other than a sustained reflection on an event, or a communal purpose, can sustain institutions. Initiation rights, organizational structure, or historical ties can all impel an organization through time. All of these the church has, as such, and it is certainly possible that an organization could persist, and yet lose that which had, at one time, made it the ‘church’. Jenson says succinctly, “Tradition...is notoriously a threat to such content, precisely as it maintains the transmitting group” (1997, 25).

All this is not to say that the ‘church’ should be other than an organized institution existing in the world. That it must be. Double-edged swords of course cut both ways, the practice of theology, the speculative side of theology, are aimed at skill-at-arms. Doing theology, and being a member of the church, is an act of faith. God uses the church to preserve the gospel – for Jenson, this is the activity of the Holy Spirit: “Faith that the church is still the church is faith in the Spirit’s presence and rule in and by the structures of the church’s historical continuity” (1997, 25). The church, while an historical entity, is also eschatological. One of Jenson’s typical claims is that the Spirit is the power of the future. The church is only finally constituted by its eschatological purpose, and by God’s promise that in it, his ends will be fulfilled.

Historically speaking, the church produces the scriptures. Alternately, we may say that the church receives them from the Holy Spirit. However it is viewed, Jenson asserts that once scripture is established, it is, in the traditional formula, *norma normans non normata*. This much, however, does not tell us how it actually functions.

Within a tradition, in disputes we appeal to an authority. This authority may be a bishop or theologian of the past, or a figure who has, through the course of the tradition been found to be helpful in delimiting gospel-speaking. In the case of irreconcilable authorities, the final authority for the church is the testimony of the apostles. This is because “if the apostles did not get it right, no one ever did” (Jenson 1997, 27). If the apostolic witness to, and appreciation of, the events of the resurrection were significantly flawed, then as Paul says, “our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God...we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:14-15, 19). This means that “belief that the gospel is still extant includes belief that the canon is adequate. And adequacy is, as with dogma, all that is required” (Jenson 1997, 19).

Scripture is the norm of gospel-speaking, not directly of either faith or theology, “it is therefore necessary to distinguish between Scripture’s authority as living word of God and its authority as a norm used in the church’s theological effort to speak that living word” (Jenson 1997, 28-9). Above this, scripture is complex, and it is not straightforward how it can be used as a norm. It speaks with more than one voice. We do not have to reproduce all of the claims of those voices. Not all apostolic claims may be felicitous: “we turn to the apostolic church not for the certainly best thought-out instances of gospel-speaking, but for unchallengeable instances” (Jenson 1997, 32). When confronted with diversity in the New Testament, even to the point of disagreement, it is not necessary to

artificially harmonise. The faith and theology of the church evolve in a process of discussion directed toward the event of the resurrection. We engage with the New Testament as in a continuing deliberation. For Jenson, “Theology is a continuing argument between different and sometimes incompatible proposals, and presumably always will be” (1997, 33). As such, the use of scripture as a norm cannot happen by the piling up of proof-texts, rather “the Scripture test of a theologoumenon is its success as a [sic] hermeneutical principle: whether it leads to exegetical success or failure with mandated churchly homiletical, liturgical, and catechetical uses of Scripture” (Jenson 1997, 33.). Jenson goes on to talk briefly about the role of the offices of the church as normative, but for our purposes in describing his understanding of the norms of theology, this should suffice.

VI. Is Jenson’s Metaphysics Bad?

Having now suggested that under some plausible broad definition, and even under some narrower methodological constraints, Jenson’s theology can indeed be seen as a part of the efforts of contemporary metaphysics, I would like now briefly to consider whether Jenson’s theology could be good metaphysics. There are at least two ways that a metaphysical project can fail to be good. It can fail in method, and it can fail in execution. This article has not discussed the execution of Jenson’s project, but has focused exclusively upon his method, and the justification thereof. As such, I will restrict this evaluation to Jenson’s method as it relates to Truthmaker and other similar theories. In particular, I will very briefly consider criticism of Truthmaker, and ask whether, should such critique prove compelling, Jenson’s project fails on a methodological level.

Trenton Merricks, in his work *Truth and Ontology* (2007), provides a host of reasons to deny Truthmaker and the related view, Truth Supervenes on Being. Let us grant that Merricks provides sufficient argument to dispose of Truthmaker, even if he actually does not. How much of a problem for Jenson’s method would this be? Fortunately for Jenson, not much. Merricks’s case against Truthmaker is that there are some truths for which we ought not to assert that there is a truthmaker, and that the truthmaker is inadequately motivated. These weigh against Truthmaker. Nevertheless, this does not mean that no truths have truthmakers, indeed Merricks thinks that positive claims about actual things do have truthmakers (2007, 168-169). As such claims are the basis of Jenson’s efforts, his overlap with Truthmaker is not fatal to his project, even granting Merricks’s arguments. As a result, Merricks does not give us reason to think that Jenson’s work is flawed at the level of method, and, pending an exploration of how Jenson carries this method through; it is at least possible that Jenson’s theology constitutes good metaphysics.

VII. Conclusion

My purpose has been to lend plausibility to Jenson’s claim that his theology is metaphysics. I have done this by seeing how Jenson fares under some broad understandings of metaphysics. In this, I found that, Jenson fails under Adrian

Moore's definition, but very likely succeeds under Loux's. I then turned to a narrower understanding of the method of metaphysics in some important 20th century authors. I found that, so long as the range of propositions taken as prephilosophical data is fairly broad, Jenson's theology does look quite a lot like a metaphysics which moves from language to ontology. As there is no consensus as to how broad this range of propositions ought to be, it should not be a problem for Jenson that he requires it to be quite broad. I then related some of Jenson's views on how the Bible can function as a norm for theology. I finished by asking whether Jenson's similarity to types of metaphysics which move from propositions to ontology could be problematic for him, given recent critique by Trenton Merrick of Truthmaker and Truth Supervenes on Being. I found that even by Merrick's standards, in this, at least, Jenson can pass. As such, it is at least plausible that when Jenson says his theology is metaphysics, according to the standards of contemporary metaphysics, he is right.

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